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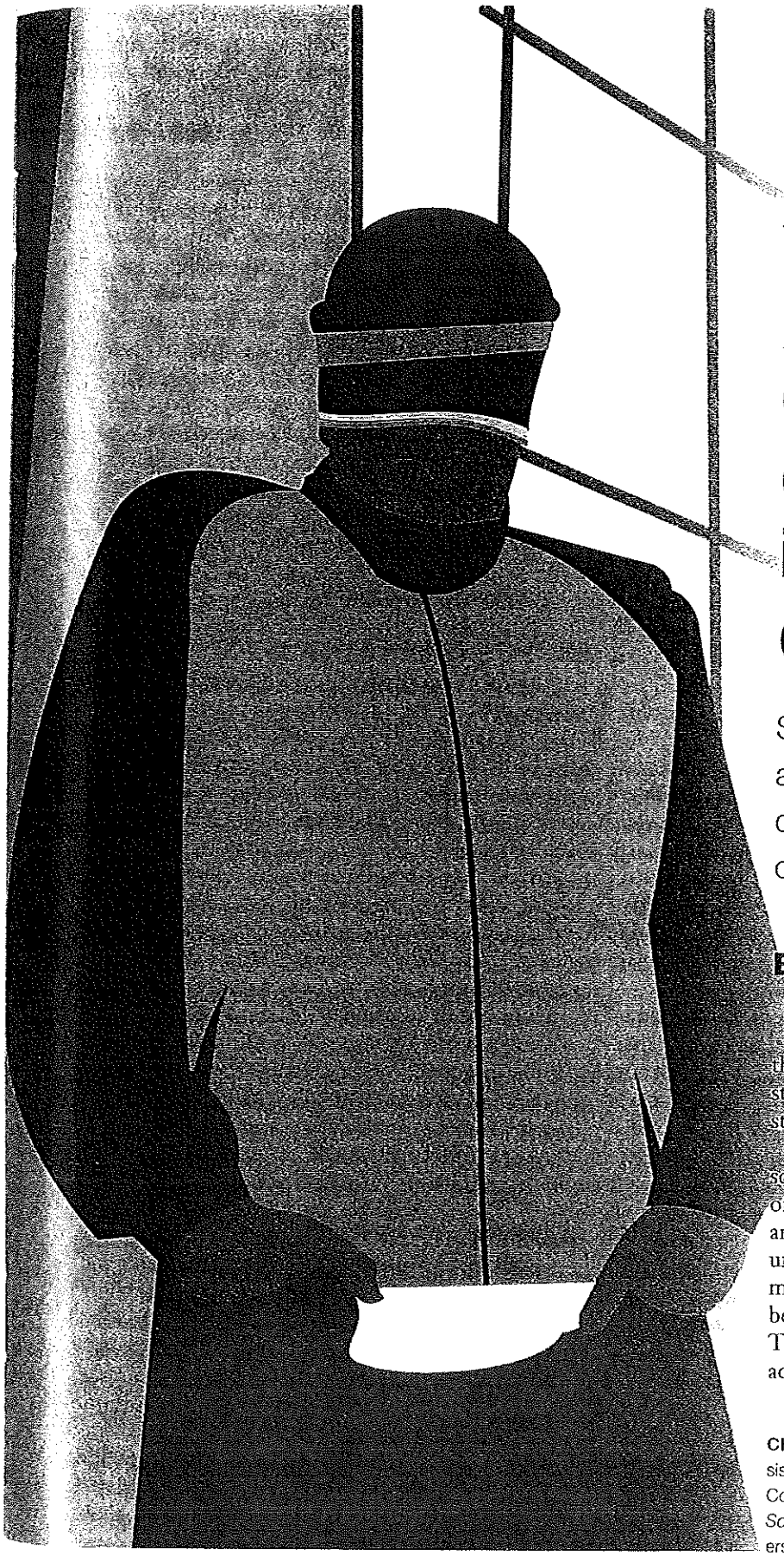

Yes, black males are different, but **different** is not **deficient**

Stop pretending that all students are alike; teaching to their differences will improve their chances for academic success.

By Christopher Emdin

Plenty of reports and research have documented the achievement gap between black males and other students. But few have acknowledged that current structures and practices have contributed to that gap.

To address the low achievement of black males, schools must be willing to accept that there are ways of looking at the world, modes of communication, and approaches to teaching and learning that are unique to black males. At the same time, educators must also acknowledge that these unique ways of being are just as complex as those of other students. The tie that binds all students is the desire to be academically successful.

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Too often, educators are afraid to acknowledge that differences exist between black males and others. This is due to a commonly held misperception that educators who acknowledge such differences are in some way supporting a racist agenda. They are not. Instead, part of our collective failure to meet the needs of black males is a fear of acknowledging that they are always being compared to a white middle-class norm from which they often differ. This culture of fear, stoked by political correctness, only serves to hamper efforts to meet their needs and will inevitably maintain achievement gaps.

There are ways of looking at the world, modes of communication, and approaches to teaching and learning that are unique to black males.

Once difference is fully acknowledged, educators can equip themselves with tools that can be used to encourage black males to become more interested and effective learners.

Different is not deficient

When I argue for understanding differences between black males and their peers, I'm not referring to genetic or developmental differences. Any such notion is scientifically unfounded and a waste of time to explore in detail. But we should focus on the social and psychological baggage that different youths bring to the classroom. The often inescapable public image of black males does not include a desire or ability to be academically successful.

A wide array of black male images in media — music, movies, and television programs — take characteristics of black culture, tie them to anti-school identities, violence, and misogyny, and use them as forms of entertainment. This means the world is inundated with scenarios that leave a false perception of black males that these youths must deal with when they enter classrooms. Such images don't affect the academic performance of nonblack males nor how they interact with school. But black males are being socially typecast and face a constant internal dilemma of fitting into expectations embodying these false characteristics or finding spaces where they can engage in practices that are counter to the perceptions.

This constant preoccupation with who they should be when they're in academic spaces results in a battle to find oneself in the classroom. That diminishes their availability to fully engage in teaching and learning. This is most evident in scenarios where black males are rude and disruptive in school, yet quiet, attentive, and responsible in spaces like church or in the community where their true selves are welcome. They are constantly in a search to find themselves and to perform versions of these selves based on the expectations of those within these spaces.

Black males have developed a variety of ways to respond to this confusion about how they should act in school. Some have developed the ability to ignore or fight through these misperceptions and find academic success. This is often the case in schools that value them for who they are and not for what they are supposed to be. Others struggle daily as they dance between the role of being an academically disinterested black male and being their true self. Many others have performed the role of disinterested black male for so long that it's become almost second nature to underperform in school. Unfortunately, as students have performed these images, educators have failed to acknowledge that they have a responsibility to help students overcome these expectations of disinterest and low achievement.

The five C's of reality pedagogy

In order to acknowledge the difference of black males and to consider the variation in their experiences, I've developed five tools for teaching black males that have had some success in my research: cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, and content. This research and its developed tools are based on the fact that when black males are in social spaces that align with their core identities, their desires to think critically, make keen observations, support these observations with facts, and engage in dialogue are activated. Most importantly, these tools give teachers an opportunity to get feedback from black males about their teaching. They acknowledge that black males are different, and they help teachers make sense of these differences so that they can meet the needs of all students. These tools use the communality that exists among black males to strip away the media-imposed perceptions of who they should be and reveal their true academic selves.

Cogenerative dialogues

In cogenerative dialogues, four to six students and their teacher — during lunch, before or after school — engage in a conversation about the classroom. These dialogues provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in discussions with students about the classroom without dealing with formal classroom structures that encourage black males to act disinterested in learning. These dialogues will allow the teacher to have conversations with black male students about how the teacher can better meet their specific academic needs and allow them to present

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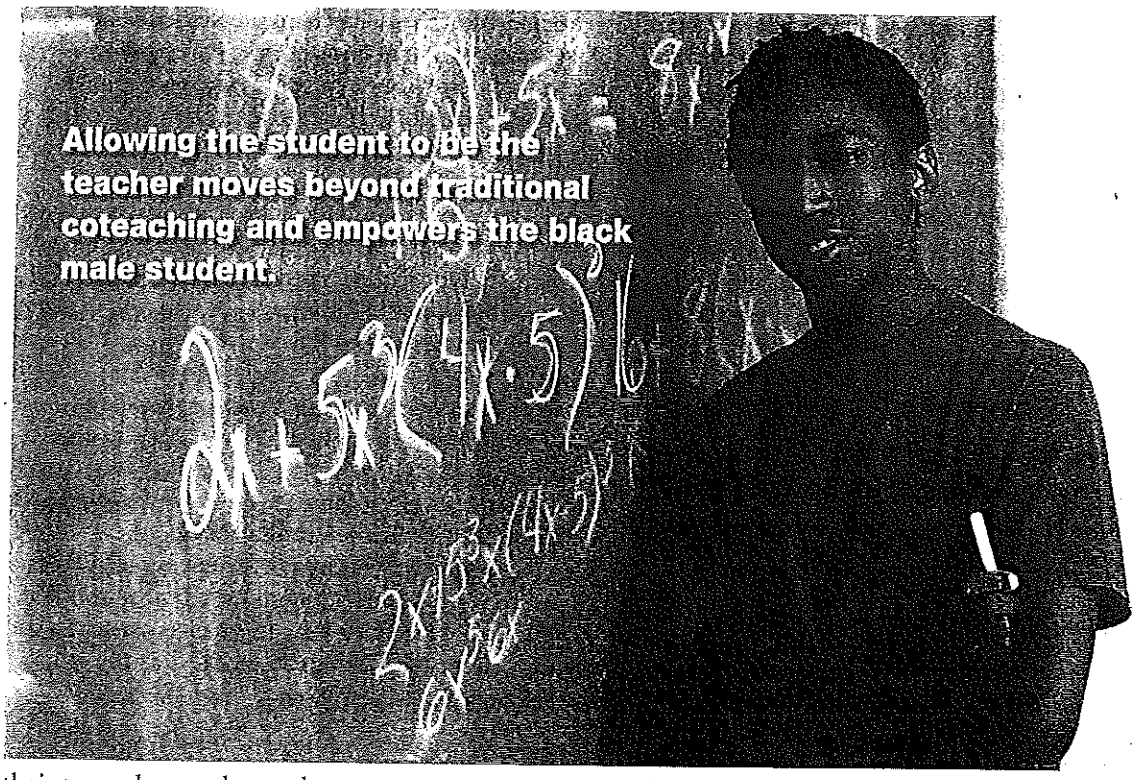

Allowing the student to be the teacher moves beyond traditional coteaching and empowers the black male student.

their true selves to the teacher.

To create the conditions for these dialogues, the teacher:

- Selects students to participate based on the different types of black male academic roles — e.g., high-achieving and low-achieving students.
- Tells students that participating in the dialogues is voluntary and that the teacher's goal is to become a more effective teacher.
- Ensures that all participants in the dialogues have equal turns to talk by soliciting responses from all students.
- Ensures that all talk is respectful of other participants. The teacher also asks all participants to listen attentively and allow their peers to complete their thoughts before responding. The phrase "one mic" is repeated when this rule is violated by any member of the group, so students can manage each other and maintain a fruitful dialogue.

The conversation must generate an action plan for addressing an issue raised in dialogues.

Coteaching

In traditional coteaching, a novice teacher observes or assists an expert teacher. In reality pedagogy with black males, coteaching positions the black male as the expert and allows him to teach the class. Allowing the student to be the teacher moves beyond traditional coteaching and empowers the black male student by allowing him to become engaged in class and validated for enacting a positive and more academic behavior.

Coteaching in reality pedagogy can be supported through the following steps:

Before class, the teacher:

- Invites black male students who have been engaged in cogenerative dialogues to be the initial coteachers.
- Assigns these student-teachers to design a lesson.
- Does a quick review of the lesson plan before class to ensure that content is reflected accurately.

During class, the teacher:

- Sits in the seat of the student-teacher and in the view of the student-teacher.
- Takes notes on the student's teaching, focusing on modes of interaction, use of analogy/metaphor, and types of phrases used to support learners who are struggling with content.
- Pays close attention to parts of the lesson where the content delivered may not be correct and guides the instruction (by raising a hand as a traditional student would) only when there are issues with the content.

After class, the teacher:

- Engages in a cogenerative dialogue with the

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student so he can reflect on the lesson taught, and the teacher can ask questions about the nuances of the lesson based on his notes.
- Teaches the same lesson students previously taught to another class using techniques from the student's lesson.
- Discusses with the student-teacher the content delivered during the class and how the black male student who coteaches can help other students who are still struggling to understand the subject.

Black males have developed a variety of ways to respond to confusion about how they should act in school.

Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitanism philosophy holds that all human beings feel an inherent need to be responsible for each other in some way. Developing a cosmopolitan ethos in the classroom is a responsibility that the teacher should have and must fulfill with black male students. These students must feel like they have roles in the classroom that allow them to be responsible for each other and that allow others to recognize that they have value in the classroom. Once this happens, black youths become connected to the physical structure of the classroom and then can get connected to academics. For example, they may be asked to be in charge of collecting homework in the classroom or handing out laptops or other materials. When these roles are enacted consistently and youth begin to see that they are needed in the classroom, they are more apt to express their true interests in performing well academically.

To create a cosmopolitan classroom, the teacher:

- Identifies the roles and responsibilities for tasks that make the class run smoothly.
- Invites black male students to select roles they want to take on.
- Dedicates the first weeks of school to explicitly discussing the roles of students.
- Changes roles at significant points in the school year — school breaks, semesters, etc. — and transitions youths from roles related to organizing the classroom to roles that support academic success.

Context

For context focus, teachers and students engage in a set of practices that brings symbolic artifacts of significance to black males into the classroom. Such artifacts are objects in the students' lives that can connect to the in-class lesson. For example, rap songs, pictures from the streets students come from, and other examples that directly relate to what's usually associated with negative attributes of black males should be used to connect them academically.

For teachers, finding artifacts from the contexts where youth are embedded will require them to go where black males spend the most time. There must be a willingness to visit their neighborhoods, watch the television programs that they watch, and listen to music that they like. This approach connects the teacher to the learner in complex ways that only become revealed when students start making connections to these artifacts on their own. Furthermore, it allows the teacher to display the effort involved in making the subject relevant to black males.

For example, youths can be encouraged to create rap songs about the content, pictures from local parks can be used to explain science concepts, and pop culture magazines can be used as the text for English lessons.

Content

The final step in reality pedagogy is content: the academic work the teacher is responsible for covering and the teacher's willingness to expose and embrace the limitations of his or her own content knowledge.

In this step, teachers commend black males for finding content inconsistencies in what the teacher is sharing and allow them to share these inconsistencies publicly. The process requires the teacher's willingness to make statements such as "I don't know" and "that's a good question" when black male students pose questions. Demonstrating this humility helps create a classroom environment where vulnerability is welcome. Acknowledging that education isn't about a completed body of knowledge and that the teacher does not have all of the answers expands student perceptions about the nature of learning. When black males understand that they aren't merely being expected to memorize material from an accepted body of information, they become more willing to behave differently in this new classroom environment.

Conclusions

Given the persistence of achievement gaps, educators must be willing to move beyond political correctness, stop rehashing approaches that have not worked for decades, and stop paying lip service to meeting the needs of black males without changing practices. Acknowledging the differences between black males and their counterparts and enacting reality pedagogy is a first step. K